

WHITE HOUSE DENIES DEFECTOR REPORT
BY MICHAEL J. SNIFFEN
WASHINGTON

A White House spokesman denied on Monday published reports that a senior Soviet KGB major-general defected to the United States last spring, and intelligence experts questioned the reports.

Assistant FBI Director Bill Baker said, "We know of nobody who fits that description."

Intelligence experts said the FBI is involved directly in the debriefing of all defectors — even those who are not intelligence agents — because they may have served with or know other Soviets working here as spies.

Asked to comment on a U.S. News and World Report article about the purported high-ranking defector, White House spokesman Larry Speakes said, "That story is not correct that there was a major KGB defector back in May. Not so."

"This KGB defector described in U.S. News and World Report is not so," Speakes added when pressed whether he was denying the accuracy of the entire story or just part of it.

One source knowledgeable about national security matters said the report was "exaggerated and overblown." The source demanded anonymity.

Several experts speculated that an account involving a low-level defector got distorted in the process of being retold by several people before it reached print.

Earlier, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee said the CIA has told the panel nothing about such a KGB official who the magazine said defected to the United States last year.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said CIA officials continued to tell him as late as Sunday morning that no such defector existed. "They are denying it today," he said.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., said he had received a "preliminary report" on the alleged Soviet defector. He declined to comment further until he received a more thorough briefing on the case and said he was "not yet sure about the information."

CIA spokeswoman Patti Volz declined comment on the U.S. News report or on a similar, subsequent account in The New York Times. She said the agency doesn't discuss defectors.

U.S. News and World Report said the Soviet officer "was smuggled out of East Germany in late April or early May by helicopter and debriefed at a U.S. base in West Germany." The report said the defection was kept secret "to prevent press leaks that might have upstaged the Geneva summit in Geneva."

The Times said the alleged KGB defector was providing more valuable information than Vitaly Yurchenko, the KGB general-designate who defected last summer and then returned to the Soviets three months later.

Leahy said that at any given time the CIA "handles several significant defectors" whose identities are not made public. He said the CIA was responsible for advising the intelligence committees about defectors, but said he had not received any information on this case.

A congressional source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said there were "several defectors over the past few years that have not become public, and it could be one of them." He said that details concerning the defector "did not jump out at him."